

## Civil War Book Review

---

Summer 2013

Article 21

---

### Captives in Blue: The Civil War Prisons of the Confederacy

Evan Kutzler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Kutzler, Evan (2013) "Captives in Blue: The Civil War Prisons of the Confederacy," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.3.22

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss3/21>

## Review

Kutzler, Evan

Summer 2013

**Pickenpaugh, Roger** *Captives in Blue: The Civil War Prisons of the Confederacy*. University of Alabama Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8173-1783-6

### Dealing with a Tidal Wave

Roger Pickenpaugh has produced an impressive counterpart to his earlier work on northern prisons during the American Civil War. His recent monograph, *Captives in Blue: The Civil War Prisons of the Confederacy*, takes a sweeping examination of prisons and captivity in the Confederate South from the trickle of prisoners in 1861 to the torrent in 1864. The geographical coverage is also wide in scope, ranging from places as disparate as Richmond, Virginia, to Camp Ford, Texas. Using mostly wartime manuscripts, newspapers and, to a lesser extent the Official Records, *Captives in Blue* is painstakingly researched from the perspective of prisoners, utilizing at least fifty-one archival repositories around the country. This is by no means an easy accomplishment, and it suggests the meticulous effort necessary to comb through such decentralized sources. The rich evidentiary base makes *Captives in Blue* not an operational history of military prisons but a social history of prisoners. Pickenpaugh succeeds in balancing broad generalizations with the local context of individual prisons.

The organization of *Captives in Blue* is chronological, beginning with Richmond Prisons in 1861 where Pickenpaugh advances several subtle themes and arguments about topics important to prison historiography. Most important to the nature of *Captives in Blue* is the assertion that wartime diarists, in contrast to postwar writers, “were much less likely to complain about their captors than they were about the facilities in which they were housed” (7). In making this argument, Pickenpaugh also argues that the makeshift nature of prison keeping, rather than official policy, led to the abysmal conditions, suffering, and high death rate (14). Confederate officials were unprepared for prisoners in 1861, let alone the increase brought on by the cessation of the exchange cartel that operated during half of 1862 and 1863. The horrors of Libby, Belle Island,

Andersonville, Florence, and Salisbury, rather than being deliberate decisions, were sins “more of omission than commission” (238). A third underlying assertion is that government officials in the North shared responsibility with the South for prison conditions in the South. “During the early months of the war,” Pickenpaugh writes, “most of the problems grew out of President Abraham Lincoln’s dogged insistence that nothing be done that would in any way imply an official recognition of the Confederate government” (10).

In chapters two, three, and four, Pickenpaugh discusses the experience of captives in Confederate prisons and Union parole camps before the breakdown of the exchange cartel in 1863. Pickenpaugh persuasively demonstrates that the wretched conditions in northern parole camps, where paroled prisoners were kept until officially exchanged, closely competed with the conditions in southern prisons. When prisoners were not fighting among themselves, trying to take “French leave,” or raiding local farms on parole, they rioted against the to which conditions their own government subjected them (67). Here Pickenpaugh uses his expertise on northern prisons (some of these parole camps later became prisons for Confederates) to make an original and compelling point about captivity experience. On the question of why the exchange cartel broke down, Pickenpaugh is less clear. He remains committed to a skeptical view of the Lincoln administration. Civil War historians have traditionally explained the breakdown as either a cold calculation of manpower by Union or the Confederate’s refusal to exchange black prisoners of war. In carefully worded prose, Pickenpaugh writes, “there is no substantial evidence that the Union’s desire to protect its black prisoners was not sincere” (73). As a thematic unit, these chapters demonstrate that while experiences were bad for prisoners, they typically did not accuse their captors of intentional murder.

The chronological organization of *Captives in Blue* presents readers with a perspective that individual case studies do not provide. Prison life conjures scenes of motionlessness, but the pages of *Captives in Blue* are full of movement. Captives found themselves traveling by foot and train from prisons in Virginia to Georgia, then to facilities in South Carolina, sometimes only to be moved back to Georgia. Chapters five through nine chronicle the movement and deteriorating conditions of prisoners, beginning in Libby Prison and Belle Island in Richmond, Virginia, and ending with Andersonville, Georgia. Pickenpaugh readily admits the conditions were wretched. Lice, filth, and malnutrition were all part of daily life. However, Pickenpaugh reiterates his earlier argument that while prisoners protested the conditions they generally did not blame their

captors (77, 93). The prison in Danville, Virginia, which served as the first stop in a series of movements that took captives deep into the southern interior, is the subject of chapter seven. Here Pickenpaugh introduces two themes that dominate the remainder of the book: the specter of death and desperate attempts at escape (108).

Andersonville is the subject of two chapters and the horrors are retold in expectedly gruesome detail. Thousands of prisoners died, often loudly clinging to life in their final moments, under a scorching sun with inadequate space, shelter, or food. Pickenpaugh provides a generous interpretation of the prison's commander, Henry Wirz, who "worked tirelessly to better the condition of the prisoners" (123). Here Pickenpaugh moderates his thesis that prisoners did not blame their captors for intentional cruelty. "Actual charges of personal misconduct against Wirz are largely absent from personal diaries," he writes, "and those that appear are uncorroborated" (124). Likewise, Pickenpaugh notes that prisoners who watched men shot down while getting water from the stream believed the guards received a furlough for their work. He does not dispute these shootings, but he argues that no Confederate records exist to substantiate the claims (154). The point about the evidentiary records is probably correct, but here the prisoners clearly did attribute blame for unnecessary shootings.

Following the chapters on Andersonville, Pickenpaugh narrows his focus and discusses Union officers and African Americans because their prison experiences varied from enlisted men. Conditions were generally better for Union officers than enlisted men and African American soldiers. Pickenpaugh argues that officers took a more progressive view of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Lincoln Administration. In contrast to enlisted men, officers did not blame their own government for forsaking them in the South (172-173). The experience of black prisoners of war is tricky to excavate because few wrote about their experiences and whites rarely mentioned black captives (193). Some black prisoners were summarily executed after capture, others were enslaved or re-enslaved, and others were imprisoned alongside white captives. At Andersonville, for instance, black prisoners were put on work details and were subjected to whippings (195).

The final three chapters follow the movement of prisoners of war from Andersonville to makeshift prisons in the ever-shrinking Confederacy in 1864 and early 1865. Even as the Confederacy began collapsing, the number of prisoners increased, putting nearly every possible prison space into use. The

rations were so short that many believed they were being starved into taking the Oath of Allegiance to the Confederacy and enlisting in the Southern army. Pickenpaugh finds no evidence this was ever a Confederacy strategy, but some 1,700 Union prisoners switched sides, at least on paper, in the final months of the war (217-18). Such desperate acts reflect the perceived choices for prisoners who had no reason to believe the still-raging war would end in April 1865.

Historians are admittedly trained to be more critical of shortcomings than they are to be empathetic in the difficult task of writing history. To be sure, the book would benefit from a clear introduction and conclusion. Likewise, Pickenpaugh's subtle arguments are sometimes difficult to follow as they are interwoven with the detailed use of individual accounts. This is especially true in the final chapters. Nonetheless, *Captives in Blue* will appeal to a wide audience for good reason. It is the most compressive treatment of prisoners of war to date. Generalists and an educated public audience will find it readable and not laden with jargon. For Civil War historians and graduate students, this book provides a rich documentary trail. *Captives in Blue* brings coherence to the complicated movements and experience of prisoners of war.

*Evan Kutzler is a Ph.D. student in U.S. History at the University of South Carolina. He is currently writing a dissertation on the sensory experience of captivity and prisons during the American Civil War.*